

The Land is Alive

by Annette Ekin

For as long as I've known Jedda, the Australian land has captivated her.

I don't know anyone else who loves it more: the creeks, the big sky, the red desert, the mountains, the geology, the rock formations, the botanical curiosities.

And she has long admired Indigenous Australians' symbiotic relationship with the land, one which has sustained the spiritual and cultural life of the world's oldest living culture which dates back 60,000 years.

Jedda has had a singular window onto how the Aboriginal people view land, having grown up with the Indigenous Australian artist Jimmy Pike.

I love the story of how in the 1970s Jedda's father Steve, who taught art at a maximum security prison in Western Australia, met Pike who was then an inmate. As Steve has told Jedda, "We were kindred spirits when it came to colour". Reviving Steve and Pike's fashion label Desert Designs has meant drawing from a rich archive of Pike's landscapes rendered in his trademark, impossibly bright Texta pens; the rekindled label is an ongoing homage to Pike's work.

When Jedda and I both lived for a time in New York in 2013, we often talked about Indigenous Australians' deep connection to the land. She'd been developing a concept: standing in the land. Drawing from Indigenous Australian culture, the concept refers to a shift in perspective: being so wholly connected to the land that one isn't standing on it, but is in it – a part of it. For me, that perspective is a starting point for navigating "Universal Love."

In this series of rocky, desert landscape paintings, Jedda uses colour to express what one might feel contemplating a spiritual connection to the land. Colour is central pursuit. Jedda's compositions are based on studied observations of how rocky desert forms interact with light; the uncommon way in which it settles.

Her series references Rudolf Steiner's philosophy of anthroposophy – individual intellect as a spiritual endeavor – and Goethe's *The Metamorphosis of Plants*. Her paintings are interested in nature in motion and a deliberate framework to discern a mystical, spiritual quality in the land.

Jedda's compositions capture the awe-inspiring moment or moments of dialogue between light and land, it is a grammar of refractions, chromatics, and the expressive use of colour.

The bright aquas, earthy ochres, and sunset pinks don't necessarily correspond to what the land looks like – but how it feels to look at it, where it feels alive. Landscapes can also be invisible.

Jedda draws inspiration from David Mowaljarlai, the west Kimberly Aboriginal elder and philosopher who for over 40 years fought a native title claim battle for his Ngarinyin people before his death in 1997. Mowaljarlai called his country "our own living body, flesh and blood." The Indigenous Australian painter Judy Watson, whose philosophy Jedda also references, has called the land the "skin" of a "living organism" where underneath "the ground is

breathing, moving, sucking, swallowing.”

In "Universal Love" the abstraction of ground takes on the colour of blood – reds, ochres, burnt oranges – which course through earth. In "Planted by the Mind" we see a red opening and formation stretching up. Land isn't passive; it is a wellspring.

To imagine being in the land is not to focus on the minutiae, the plants, animals and the self, because it is all one universe. These paintings are microcosms, there are no close-ups or distances. Even when paintings like "When I'm High on a Mountain" take on a two-dimensional aspect – it is not seeing from a distance, but confronting a living, alert terrain that matters: the mountains among the clouds, the blue gums, the pink sky, in conversation.

This work, in title, refers to the Mowaljarlaim: "When I'm on a high mountain looking out over country my Unggurr [life-force] flows out from inside my body and I fall open with happiness."

And so we can imagine oneself being so overcome by this scene that we want to envelop it all.

"Fall Open with Happiness" depicts a pair of sheer yellow and white forms drifting against a backdrop of soft aqua. Organic, true colour is replaced with otherworldly hues. This is a colour study in euphoria.

Another titular reference to Mowaljarlai is "The Gift of Pattern Thinking." Mowaljarlai, who advocated mutual understanding between both Indigenous Australian and settler Australians told the Federal Court toward the end of his life: "We are really sorry for you people. We cry for you because you haven't got meaning of culture in this country. We have a gift we want to give you. We keep getting blocked from giving you that gift. We get blocked by politics and politicians. We get blocked by media, by process of law. All we want to do is come out from under all of this and give you this gift. And it's the gift of pattern thinking. It's the culture which is the blood of this country, of Aboriginal groups, of the ecology, of the land itself."

In this work, an unbroken, peach-coloured line dissects the canvas – a symbol of pattern thinking – descending deep into the earth and above like a vein running through the cosmos. "Living in the Land," one of the more detailed compositions in this series, builds on this imagery – there are fine peach-coloured lines and an alertness and activity to the forms and brushstrokes painted in the soft, harmonious colour schemes which characterise this series. It feels like a celebration.

In our age, the Anthropocene, questions about our connection to the land, how to protect it, and recovering Indigenous practices are made more urgent. "Standing in the land" was a response to the movements that seek to restore a connection with nature. Jedda's work seeks subtly to bring awareness to Aboriginal art and culture in a country where public discourse about Indigenous rights is growing louder and more nuanced. Against these global and domestic backdrops, I see her paintings as quietly political.

"Universal Love" is a catalogue of the joy that comes from watching the land and considering its magical, living qualities and an assertion of the completeness that it offers. But it is also a reminder of all the knowledge and wonderment of the land that has existed for thousands of years.

I live in a shiny, burgeoning desert city in the Middle East. It is hard for me to imagine the landscapes that Jedda's series draws from. But in looking at "Universal Love," I remember prismatic scenes from the Australian country, the bush, a glittering bay in the summertime. And I am transported.